Workers in the USSR: The Other Movement

By Orrin G. Hatch

In view of our deep national concern for the fate of Lech Walesa and for the welfare of all Polish workers, I am disturbed that we have overlooked Mr. Walesa's counterpart in the Soviet Union—Vladimir Klebanov—a former coal miner who has been incarcerated since 1978 because of his efforts to found a trade union that was not in the grip of the Kremlin. Mr. Klebanov, like many other courageous Soviet workers who have followed in his footsteps, was working for the right of workers to form independent trade unions which would operate free of Communist Party control and would therefore be truly responsive to workers' needs.

In the winter of 1977-78 Mr. Klebanov founded the Association of Free Trade Unions (AFTU). Shortly thereafter the AFTU was abolished by the Communist Party, and Mr. Klebanov and several others were arrested and confined to prisons or psychiatric hospitals. Now 50 years old, Mr. Klebanov has spent his last four years imprisoned in a special psychiatric hospital in Dnepropetrovsk. He should be released.

Undeterred by what has happened to Mr. Klebanov and other advocates of workers' rights, Soviet workers have continued their struggle to establish independent trade unions. In October 1978, the Free Interprofessional Association of Workers (SMOT) was formed in Moscow to carry on the work that was started by Mr. Klebanov's group.

Arrested for 'Agitation'

Like their predecessors, seven SMOT members were arrested and confined to either prisons or psychiatric institutions. At this writing two—Mark Morozov and Vladimir Skvirsky—are still incarcerated. Mr. Morozov, who bears the double burden in the eyes of the Kremlin of being Jewish as well as an advocate of workers' rights, was arrested in Moscow in 1980 for "recidivist anti-Soviet agitation." He is serving a sentence of eight years in a strict regimen camp. Mr. Skvirsky, who was arrested in Moscow in 1979 on a charge of stealing library books, was sentenced to five years internal exile. Vsevolod Kuvakin, a lawyer who has assisted both labor groups, is also still in prison.

In August 1981, for the first time in its history, the UN-funded International Labor Organization severely reprimanded the Soviet Union. The confrontation was over the suppression of SMOT in violation of ILO Convention 87, which guarantees workers the right to freedom of association. I attended this dramatic June 1981 annual conference of the ILO, which featured an electrifying address by Lech Walesa.

An ILO committee urged the Soviet Union to amend its labor legislation "to allow organizations independent of the existing trade union structure to be formed and legally represent the interests of their members." Moreover the committee pointed out the tight control that the Communist Party holds over existing USSR trade unions, which effectively negates their supposed function of serving the interests of the workers (Lenin regarded trade unions as "schools of communism").

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Like their counterparts in Poland, men and women in the USSR—whether farmers, factory employes or senior engineers—have a number of very serious grievances: dissatisfaction with inefficient planning and unrealistic production quotas; acute shortages of tools and materials (particularly in the construction industry); blatant discrimination against former political prisoners, evangelical Protestants, Jews, the handicapped and women; and unsafe conditions in mines, factories and other workplaces.

Another thorn in the side of Soviet workers is pitifully low wages, coupled with devices to force them to meet arbitrary "production quotas." One such device is the piece-rate system, whereby each worker's weekly pay is based on the number of pieces that he or she produces individually. On the surface this looks like a design

What about the worker who tries to function within the system? According to reports I have received from dissidents within the Soviet Union, workers from all walks of life have a difficult time obtaining adequate housing, food staples and other necessities. It is not just that pay is low. In the USSR the key to survival is *access* to goods and services. Many items, such as single-family apartments and basic foodstuffs (milk and meat, for instance), are extremely hard to come by—except for the *privilegirovaniye* (privileged ones) who already have a "trade union"—the Communist Party.

Members of the Soviet elite, which include managers and top-level bureaucrats, have access to special stores where they purchase food and other goods not available to everyone else. This stands in stark contrast to the vast majority of Soviet citizens who spend much of their time making contacts, bartering their services and literally scrounging for food, clothing and so forth—while the elite, who receive

The discrepancies between the two groups might not seem so intolerable if workers had any hope of upward mobility. Obviously they cannot turn to leaders of established trade unions, who work hand-in-glove with the Communist Party. Union leaders' objective is to keep management happy by increasing production at minimum cost to the state. For their good works they are paid off with "bonuses," such as new apartments or paid vacations.

Refused to Jeopardize Lives

Given such intolerable conditions, how long will it be until a "Solidarity" springs up in the USSR? To answer this question let us consider how Lech Walesa's counterpart was dealt with when he first spoke out for workers' rights. Vladimir Klebanov's first offense occurred in the 1960s when he refused to order the workers he supervised to continue to jeopardize their lives by working in a mine with a high accident and fatality rate. Moscow's response: He was labeled "socially dangerous" and locked up in a psychiatric hospital from 1968 to 1973.

As undaunted as Lech Walesa, in the face of Soviet repression Mr. Klebanov founded the AFTU in 1978—only to be punished even more severely for his efforts to organize an independent trade union. Unlike Mr. Walesa, however, Mr. Klebanov was never able to transform the trade union he organized into a legally recognized, effective channel through which workers' grievances could be resolved. Just a few months after the AFTU was founded, Mr. Klebanov was apprehended and taken to a regional psychiatric hospital in Donetsk, where, according to Amnesty International, psychiatrists diagnosed him as suffering from "paranoid development of the personality" with a mania for "struggling for justice." In spite of this repression, SMOT underground publications (which the trade unionists call "slave reports") continue to reach the West. The "paranoia" continues.

Sen. Hatch, Republican of Utah, is [illegible] *Senate Labor and Human*